

# **Situating Nunavut Education with Indigenous Education in Canada**

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## **Abstract**

Recognizing that educational change in Nunavut has not been extensively documented, this article provides an entry point for considering how Nunavut can be better understood and situated with scholarship on Indigenous education in Canada. Comparing the history of education in Nunavut with key turning points in First Nations education, the article illustrates important distinctions in understanding the Arctic context. Examination of more current issues illustrates the distinctive perspective offered from Nunavut – Canada’s only jurisdiction where the entire public education system is intended to be responsive to the Indigenous (Inuit) majority. Finally, four areas of common struggle are proposed for further consideration: walking in two worlds; human resource development; decolonization; and, radical implementation and radical pedagogy.

*Keywords:* Inuit education; Nunavut education; Indigenous education; educational change; history of education

## **Précis**

Reconnaissant que le changement en éducation au Nunavut n'a pas été largement documenté, cet article fournit un point d'entrée pour examiner comment le Nunavut peut être mieux compris et situé au sein de la littérature sur l'éducation autochtone au Canada. En comparant l'histoire de l'éducation au Nunavut avec des moments clés dans l'éducation des Premières Nations, l'article illustre d'importantes distinctions pour mieux comprendre le contexte de l'Arctique. Une analyse des questions plus actuelles démontre que le Nunavut - seule juridiction au Canada où l'ensemble du système d'éducation publique est destiné à répondre à une majorité autochtone (Inuit) - offre une perspective distincte. Enfin, quatre domaines de lutte commune sont proposés pour un examen plus approfondi: marcher dans deux mondes; le développement des ressources humaines; la décolonisation; puis les mise en œuvre et pédagogie radicales.

### **Situating Nunavut Education with Indigenous Education in Canada**

Inuit education remains on the margins of Canadian Indigenous educational scholarship, if even seen there. Inuit distinctions are not always taken into account in generalizations about Indigenous experience, and the movement towards educational self-determination in Nunavut is largely being missed in the literature. What are the implications of this gap and how can it be addressed? In the interest of following a path that arrives at greater understanding about educational change, can the same reference points about the past, present and future be used for Inuit education as are used in the literature on Indigenous education? What common strengths and challenges can be identified, and further explored? What distinctions must be noted? Drawing on my knowledge of Inuit education in the context of Nunavut, and documentation of Indigenous education elsewhere in Canada, there are three parts to this work: a brief overview of educational history, identification of current issues in education, and an exploration of four shared struggles in the present and future that emerge through this general comparison. I am starting with history, acknowledging the local and variable nature of educational strengths and challenges in Indigenous communities – illustrated here by examining Inuit education in Nunavut – and using this context to inform a discussion of where to go in future. I believe the circumstances of education in Nunavut – largely focused on changing education to better benefit Inuit students, families and communities – provides an important location from which to contribute, and perhaps strengthen, ideas about walking in two worlds, securing the right education human

resources, decolonizing schools and moving forward with greater reliance on Indigenous educational pedagogy.

Given the diversity of Indigenous peoples in Canada, it is not easy to draw generalizations about directions and needs in education that will be equally relevant across the country. Indigenous and ally scholars have nonetheless worked towards such conclusions, sometimes grounding their studies in place, and other times using broad strokes to establish solidarity and build frameworks that can adequately withstand resistance to Western/Eurocentric hegemony (e.g., Archibald, 2008; Battiste, 2000; 2010; Battiste & Barman, 1995; Battiste & Henderson, 2009; Dei, 2011a; Dion, 2009; Haig-Brown, 2008; Kirkness, 1998; 1999; Marker, 2004; 2006; 2011b; Stewart-Harawira, 2005; Wilson, 2004). It is often difficult to tell whether Inuit are intended to be included in works categorized as “Indigenous”. In my view, many of the same themes are relevant to Inuit education, but usually operate in different ways because of factors including: the shorter period of colonization; the majority Inuit population; and, prevalence and vitality of Inuit culture and language. Therefore, identifying and engaging with educational theory that is both decolonizing and reconstructive for education in the context of Nunavut today, is way-finding work that requires some unique reference points. Seeking this path, however, should not shut out the ability to see intersections, or shared struggles, with other Indigenous peoples. With more documentation of the educational context in Nunavut and recognition of Inuit distinctiveness in the Canadian Indigenous experience, such careful comparative work can contribute to deeper engagement with Indigenous ways of teaching and learning.

### **How I Started on This Path**

I am a white Northerner (McGregor, 2010, x-xi), born in Yellowknife, raised in Iqaluit, educated in northern schools and I have also worked in the Nunavut education system. I watched first-hand as the federal government officially recognized Nunavut by signing the land claim in 1993; I was there on April 1, 1999 during proceedings to create the new government of Nunavut; and, also on July 1, 2009 when the Nunavut Education Act came into force and 21 Inuit women were conferred with Masters degrees in education. From an early age I have tried to practice listening to Inuit and Northerners with respect and responsibility, and engage in research by starting with listening as a methodology (Kincheloe, 2006). What I am asserting through this location is that I claim an investment in Nunavut, as Nunavut has invested in me. I am committed to strengthening Nunavut histories, honouring the good work of Inuit and Northern educators committed to change, and investing in Nunavut-based solutions. I am only beginning to explore Indigenous education in a more general sense. I recognize that while I have tried to write with care, my vantage point may be limited and it certainly remains open to conversation with those who work more closely with schools and communities.

I have framed this work as a path because walking connects me to the land, gives me perspective on the past, and makes me hopeful for change in the future. I particularly love walking in places where you can see for many miles. In my experience, a path across Baffin Island tundra, alternately rocky and marshy, always rolling and sometimes steep, is less well defined than paths in other places, and usually open to detour. Such paths do not require bush- or tree-clearing, but they do require stamina, careful footing choices and key reference points. As I walk, I sometimes feel small in relation to the expanse of

the land, and it always leads me to be thankful for the other beings with me, or nearby. Many of those involved in Inuit education are significantly committed to the ‘doing’ rather than writing in scholarly journals about their work, and this commitment is well-founded. On the other hand, given the vociferous public and media commentary on educational disengagement by Inuit students and parents, appreciative inquiries into sustainable educational change have never been more crucial. Also, much of what is being done is unique, ground-breaking and potentially informative to other Indigenous jurisdictions.

### **This Path Starts with Place: Arctic Land and History**

Inuit are the majority population in Nunavut, Canada’s most dispersed and isolated territory. Despite sophisticated technology, modern infrastructure, or government jobs, the geography and ecology continues to pervade life in the Arctic through a complex matrix of challenges and opportunities in physical, emotional, mental and social realms. The ways in which environmental factors have shaped, and continue to actively shape culture, history, education and politics in the Arctic cannot be overstated. For example, the Arctic long kept colonizers and developers at bay. On the other hand, living in fly-in communities sometimes feels suffocating without access to a greater range of recreational activities, employment and educational opportunities, or a larger social network. The environment demands persistence of many Inuit traditions in order to survive while hunting or camping; yet, many have died accidentally without the requisite skills and experience. Extreme fluctuations in hours of daylight, extreme temperatures, the cost, time and weather-dependent factors of travel in Nunavut and to southern

Canada, a relatively small and transient population, wildlife, mining resource development, environmental protection policies, and local geographic characteristics of each community are hugely significant in the lived experience of Nunavut.

The unique and intense history of Inuit colonization in the eastern Arctic has been characterized by relatively recent settlement in the Arctic; early policy moves to endorse the primacy of Inuit language and culture in all public schools; and, Inuit cultural and linguistic vitality. Inuit have had a different and less clear relationship with the federal government than First Nations or Metis peoples, due to a complex web of legal and administrative circumstances, differing colonization processes and distinct concerns (Tester & Kulchyski, 1994). It has now been 20 years since Nunavut was recognized as an Inuit homeland through the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement*, later becoming the only jurisdiction with a public government privileging Indigenous (specifically Inuit) culture and language. These environmental and historical factors have created the unusual circumstances under which Nunavut is now pursuing educational change; indeed, these factors have provided opportunities in asserting self-determination in education.

### **Remembering the Path to Schooling: Educational History**

Examining key turning points and themes in Inuit education, and linking them to experiences in Aboriginal education up to about the year 2000, provides an entry point into comparisons that deserve greater attention. This is far from a thorough literature review. I have relied primarily on Cree scholar Verna Kirkness' (1999) article "Aboriginal Education in Canada: A Retrospective and a Prospective". Kirkness took on the challenging role of opening up discussions about Indigenous education in Canada.

She provides a narrative from an Indigenous perspective that many are familiar with, and I read her work as an invitation to deepen conversations by revisiting the past.

Kirkness (1999) describes the holistic nature of Aboriginal education: “Traditionally, our people’s teachings addressed the total being, the whole community, in the context of a viable living culture” (p. 15). This general depiction can easily be transferred to traditional Inuit education, which was central to perpetuating the relationship between the environment, and the generations of Inuit – both past and future – to whom each person was connected. This education in Arctic subsistence was tailored according to who took it upon themselves to act as teacher, the local particularities of the environment, and the special abilities and interests demonstrated by the individual learner (Arnaquq, 2008; Bennett & Rowley, 2004). The most critical aspects of Inuit education were environmental knowledge, experiential learning, caring between teacher and learner, and family control over child-rearing.

This traditional form of education endured for most Inuit until the middle of the 20th century. Most Inuit Elders who saw the recognition of Nunavut territory in the 1990s did not have access to schooling as children, but rather grew up on the land. Therefore, significantly more detail and vitality around Inuit language, cultural practice and tradition have been maintained in the minds of Elders and through oral tradition, in ways that are different from Indigenous communities that were significantly affected by earlier processes of colonization and particularly residential schools.

When intensified colonization of the Arctic began in the late 1940s, it occurred quickly, involved drastic change, and dismissed the traditional approaches and outcomes of Inuit education. While some children were taken to attend residential schools earlier,

the federal government officially began a program to educate Inuit children in 1955 (King, 1998). This meant interrupting their traditional land-based education to attend residential or day schools, disrupting their relationships with family members, and teaching them that the Inuit language and culture were unacceptable in the modern world (Irniq, 2011). Attendance at various forms of residential and day schools was damaging for Inuit families and society, not just the individual students concerned. Kirkness (1999) has characterized the impact of residential schools on Aboriginal culture across Canada in the same way: “The weakening of Indian society as a whole can be attributed to boarding [residential] schools. Cultural conflict, alienation, poor self-concept, lack of preparation for jobs and for life in general derive from this deplorable experience. It is evident that not only are those who actually attended these schools affected but so are their children and their communities” (p. 16).

Yet, within a short period of time, administrative responsibility for education was transferred completely from the federal government to the Northwest Territories in 1969-70. A large scale school construction effort across the Arctic was intended to ensure younger students access to day schools, but students who wished to complete high school were still required to travel to regional centres and live in hostels (Macpherson, 1991). For students from the smallest communities, this persisted until the mid-1990s. Soon after the transfer, Inuit leaders such as John Amagoalik, Piita Irniq, and Tagak Curley, who were members of the first generation to attend schools, became politically active in negotiating for greater self-determination. For example, in 1982 a Special Committee on Education for the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly, led by Tagak Curley, issued the report *Learning: Tradition and Change* (1982). This landmark document

resulted from extensive public consultations conducted in 34 communities in the NWT; it was the first time parents were formally and systematically consulted on their children's education. What they asked for was more local control. While this initiative was conceived in the context of changes to education across the NWT (not only to benefit Inuit) and influenced by Aboriginal education policy resulting from the 1972 document *Indian Control of Indian Education*, it is important to note that the federal government did not retain any control over Inuit education at this time. Inuit were interested in protecting and promoting their language and culture within the context of the Northwest Territories, where several distinct Indigenous peoples were negotiating their educational directions and needs.

Kirkness (1999) has criticized an equivalent stage in Indigenous education – transitioning students into public day schools – as a failure from the perspective of meeting the needs of Aboriginal students: “This approach to education has not been one of true integration where the Indian cultures are respected and recognized. Rather, it has been a process of assimilation where Indians are being absorbed into the non-Indian society” (p. 16). However, in the eastern Arctic there were fewer non-Inuit students and less non-Inuit society for students to be absorbed into. This is not to suggest that Inuit students were spared from experiencing the tension of two worlds in the classroom as a result of the imported curriculum and non-Inuit teachers. Kirkness (1999) says: “The Indian child is caught between two cultures and is therefore, literally outside of, and between both” (p. 16) and likewise, Inuk poet and cartoonist Alootook Ipellie has called the experience “walking both sides of an invisible border” (Kennedy, 1996). However, without substantial public expectation that schooling be “multicultural” or “culture

neutral”, public schools in the Arctic could move in the direction of respecting and recognizing Inuit language and culture with fewer constraints.

Within 30 years of the first federal initiative to educate Inuit children, Inuit representatives and parents accomplished noteworthy control over the education system through creation of regional school boards. In working towards schools that were more reflective of Inuit language and culture, traditional environmental knowledge, experiential learning opportunities, Elders as teachers and bilingual instruction became central concerns of policy-makers (McGregor, 2010). Inuit and Northern educators worked together with Elders to begin developing a curriculum within a framework of Inuit values (Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 1996).

Since 1999 the resources of the Nunavut territorial government, rather than individual band schools or provincial arrangements regarding benefits to particular students, are being leveraged to fulfill a mandate for public education that serves the interests of Inuit students, necessitating a lower degree of compromise to mainstream expectations.

### **Another Check of the Bearings: Current Issues in Education**

There has been an explosion of literature on Indigenous education in Canada since the year 2000. Marie Battiste (2000) has laid important groundwork for the field by naming cognitive imperialism, pointing out that not enough progress had been made toward situating Indigenous consciousness, language and culture in public schools, and that most schools had insufficient plans to undertake such work. She has argued that “Aboriginal people continue to be invisible” (Battiste, 2000, p. 198) and criticized federal

and provincial governments for neglecting the protection of Aboriginal languages as a significant component of educational self-determination. She has called for: new teaching resources; consultations with Elders regarding Aboriginal epistemology; taking education into the “bush”; and, ultimately she dismisses the possibility of pursuing this work in collaboration with provincial administration for fear of it being appropriated: “The ownership of these ideas must remain with Aboriginal people” (Battiste, 2000, p. 201). Battiste & Henderson (2009) have argued that the realization of Indigenous knowledge in learning programs was still lacking except through the dedicated efforts of individuals (Elders, community leaders and professionals), and that: “Few professional schools, universities, or educational systems across Canada have made naturalization of IK [Indigenous Knowledge] a priority in their EK [Eurocentric Knowledge] curricula” (p. 15).

While information about education in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut has not been easily accessible, and Battiste, Henderson, and other Indigenous scholars may not have intended to include Inuit in documenting Indigenous education, it is unfortunate that the North appears to have been overlooked. I hope to show here that the Nunavut territorial government commitments and approaches to system-wide educational change, particularly efforts towards naturalization of Inuit knowledge in curriculum and programs, could offer important way-finding references in the present and future for Indigenous education more broadly.

Like Indigenous peoples around the globe, over the last two decades Inuit have been actively “reclaiming their cultural knowledges and asserting their legitimacy in many spaces” (Dei, 2011b, p. 3). Inuit conceptual paradigms do not include the medicine

wheel or the characteristics seen in other Indigenous cultures in Canada. Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) is defined by Elders as: “knowledge that has been passed on to us by our ancestors, things that we have always known, things crucial to our survival – patience and resourcefulness” (Bennett & Rowley, 2004, p. xxi). The holistic and inclusive nature of IQ is repeatedly emphasized: “Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit embraces all aspects of traditional Inuit culture, including values, world-view, language, social organization, knowledge, life skills, perceptions and expectations” (Nunavut Social Development Council, 1998). IQ as a “theory of knowledge” has been outlined by Jaypetee Arnakak (2000) working closely with Elders as a set of oral, practical, intergenerational teachings about social and human experience; the knowledge of “country” and interrelationships within the environment; and, holistic, dynamic and cumulative approaches to teaching and learning through observing, doing and experience.

Frank Tester and Peter Irniq (2008) have emphasized the extent to which IQ is not limited to environmental knowledge, or a development agenda or a form of documenting “traditional” (as in old, static, unchanging) and discrete items of knowledge. They engage IQ from a critical stance, from a position of resisting coercion of consciousness today and for the future: “Advocating IQ can be a political act, advancing a social and cultural agenda that attempts to counter, or at least buffer, the totalizing agenda of a colonizing culture” (Tester & Irniq, 2008, p. 51). Using the term IQ, instead of Indigenous epistemology or Inuit knowledge points to the fact that what is being engaged with cannot be confined by Western theories of knowledge and is culturally- and geographically-situated, steeped in the beliefs, values, place and worldview of Inuit.

These points provide context for the importance and potential impact of incorporating IQ as the foundation of the education system in Nunavut.

Concerted documentation and realization of IQ – including systematic work towards building school programs, materials, and staff development initiatives that incorporate Inuit knowledge with at least equal, if not more, weight than Western approaches – has been exactly the pursuit of committed educators, Elders and policy-makers in the North for at least two decades. While signing the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement* in 1993 is an important milestone leading to the creation of a new territorial government, in terms of education the land claim delivered little towards the public education system. The pace of educational change has certainly increased since the creation of Nunavut in 1999, but it was well underway before division (McGregor, 2010). Curriculum development staff within the Department of Education recognized the importance of Elder knowledge, Inuit knowledge, and the lack of source material to turn to, arguably necessary for creating curriculum and pedagogical change in schools. Instruction in the Inuit language, use of resources designed for the North, consultation with Elders on curriculum development and significant support from the territorial government to develop culturally responsive programs are all features of this work. These change-makers are actively addressing the same problem Kirkness (1998) identified in First Nations education: “Not properly acknowledging the Elders is probably the most serious mistake we make as we attempt to create a quality education for our people... How can we learn about our traditions on which to base our education if we don’t ask the Elders? Little is written by our people that we can turn to for this information” (p. 13).

The Nunavut Department of Education landmark document *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit: Education Framework for Nunavut Curriculum* (2007), resulted from research and development beginning as early as 2000. The *Nunavut Education Act*, passed in 2008, is the first provincial or territorial education legislation that strongly represents the educational vision of an Indigenous population in the history of Canada (McGregor, 2012a). The Act takes up the philosophy found within the foundation document, and endeavours to call the education system to account for linguistic, cultural and local relevance to Inuit, addressing what Kirkness (1999) called for with regard to reconceptualizing Aboriginal education: “Then we must look within ourselves, within our communities and our nations to determine which values are important to us, the content of what should be learned and how it should be learned. This new direction must relate to theories firmly based on the traditions of Our People” (p. 22). Other examples include the goal to provide bilingual education by the year 2020; certification of and special funding for Elders as co-instructors; the provision of sustainable funding to communities for early childhood language and culture programs; the made-for-Nunavut principal / vice-principal educational leadership certification program, school community counsellor training program, and the new educator orientation program. 23 Inuit women from Nunavut earned Master’s degrees in education between 2007 and 2009, and another cohort is currently participating in a 3-year made-for-Nunavut program.

I view these initiatives as significant examples of how the assumptions and structures of Eurocentric education systems are being challenged by developing alternative Inuit-based philosophy, policy, curriculum and instructional frameworks. As will be discussed in the final section, there is much work to be done to translate this

policy into practice, to continue reaching out to the dispersed communities where staff turnover and infrequent visits from Department-level support personnel make for difficulty implementing new initiatives sustainably. What I am concerned with illustrating is the ground covered thus far in decolonizing education. The realities of life in Nunavut have been slower to change than people expected when the new territory was recognized in 1999, but this must be considered in the context of a great deal of foundational work invested by Elders, educators, parents and partners in education. It is not realistic to expect that Inuit ways of teaching and learning, and the content knowledge needed to support IQ practice in schools, can be quickly researched, documented, synthesized, expanded and applied to reform the contemporary education system. This is particularly the case if those doing the work are using participatory, bilingual approaches that respect community expectations around process (McGregor, 2012b). Clearly there is no time to spare – the wellbeing of Inuit and Northern students and communities depend on continued progress and ongoing decolonization. But the Nunavut “project” both within the education system and in Canada as a whole has begun an investigation of where Inuit tradition, knowledge and values intersect with those of Canadian ways broadly speaking, and has outlined in great detail a path towards decolonization and reconstruction. The many Elders, educators, administrators, translators, and support personnel who have been doing the long, hard and foundational work on which to base constructive changes to education in Nunavut deserve appropriate acknowledgment.

### **Looking to the Horizon: Shared Struggles on Our Path(s)**

Identifying common themes moving forward – challenges through which Inuit and other Indigenous peoples across Canada can find common ground while balancing particularities of place – may open up more complex and comparative discussion. I do not mean to imply that efforts towards these realizations are currently absent or lacking in any particular context. By highlighting these themes, which are already evident in the literature, I am trying to reflect and support the great deal of good work going on. Perhaps educational change-makers may consider greater emphasis on some of these undertakings, or look for ways to share experiences in these common efforts.

### **Reconciling the Demands of Contemporary**

#### **Life with Cultural Roots in Traditional Life**

*Creating a balance between two worldviews is the great challenge facing modern educators* (Battiste, 2000, p. 202).

The balance between walking in two worlds does not come easily and is not predictable. It has caused much trauma in the past and it must be carefully and consciously pursued now. Tester and Irniq (2008) have described the current challenges with enacting IQ in contemporary Nunavut:

While elders, in the context of IQ, pursue an agenda born of a historical and political struggle that Qablunaat [non-Inuit] and young Inuit alike often fail to understand, Inuit of the younger generation, with some exceptions, pursue the modern world. They do so with what is often a confused mix of social relations: steeped in Inuit culture, they have considerable exposure to and participate in a

world characterized by very different social relations, goals, and objectives (p. 57).

For schools that have a majority Indigenous population and take on a commitment to reflect culture in learning, this challenge does not just mean presenting two sides to the history of settlement of North America. It means asking Elders for their advice and then seeking ways to translate that advice, often emerging from traditional contexts, to fit contemporary school contexts or adapting school contexts. It means making choices about how much time is spent in the computer lab versus how much time is spent on a land trip. It means making choices between preparing students for community life, using their language and local practices, and preparing students for post-secondary education or employability outside their communities. It means the flexibility to discuss modern human rights and multiculturalism in the same conversation as cultural notions of responsibility and Indigenous sovereignty. It means encouraging students to be critical of the world around them in ways that may not have been traditionally part of Inuit practice, and yet respectful of that which is sacred in their culture and other cultures. It means helping people understand that “traditional” need not be synonymous with old or unchanging, and that choosing to sustain tradition may not be simply conservative, but also activist. Referring to differences in epistemology between Indigenous cultures and dominant society, framed within differing relationships to place and the past, Michael Marker (2006) has observed: “These ideological conflicts, related to local knowledge and history, reveal the most extreme challenges to schools wishing to create a context of indigenous cultural responsiveness” (p. 490). Indeed, teachers must be supported to

reflect on and discuss these ideological conflicts with their students, parents and the community, and with each other regularly.

**Training and Retaining Sufficient Human Resources  
with the Right Skills and Capacity**

*Capacity building for self-governance in areas such as education is the most pressing issue in Aboriginal communities today* (Hare, 2007, p. 53).

Jan Hare (2007) recommends that policy guidelines in Aboriginal education must also identify specific capacity development initiatives that can be used to achieve the goals being put in place. This point is highly relevant in the context of the Government of Nunavut, which is accountable under the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement* to employ Inuit to level representative of the population (~85%), and has reached only 51% as of 2011 (Nunavut Department of Human Resources, 2011). If one were to examine whether those who are employed have the necessary education, skills, mentorship and capacity to do their jobs, feel fulfilled in their jobs, and stay in their jobs for longer than a few trial years, the existing percentage might appear less sustainable. This is not a criticism of the individuals who do their best under the circumstances; it is a criticism of unrealistic government policies that are not supported by the requisite human resource development programs. It is also an acknowledgement of the always more-than-anticipated time and resources associated with such development. Justice Berger (2006) firmly pointed out the need for federal investment in education to support implementation of the Nunavut land claim, but it appears to have been completely disregarded. Greg Poelzer (2009) has also

succinctly described and advocated for the need for increased post-secondary opportunities in the North.

In terms of the education system, the challenge of training and retaining sufficient Inuit educators, administrators and support staff, as well as long-term Northerners who have important experience on which to draw, is becoming a significant barrier to implementation of IQ-based educational policy. There has been substantial public discussion in Nunavut regarding the urgency around implementation of the bilingual education system from K-12. This has put immense pressure on existing Inuit teachers with language skills and is deterring new teachers, who know they may be expected to teach at levels or in courses where system resources, adequate training and program supports are not yet ready. The Department of Education and Nunavut Arctic College are working on several important professional development initiatives, but even with more funding it would be challenging to move any faster because for such programs to be effective they need experienced facilitators who have in-depth knowledge of northern education. Ambitious goals for Indigenous education, especially ones that necessitate specific areas of expertise (such as language) must be preceded and accompanied by ambitious goals for staff development, and significant orientation or support for existing staff in the meantime.

### **Continuing to Actively Facilitate and Participate in Decolonization**

*Rather than conforming to technocratic hegemony, the schools should challenge and critique assumptions about cultural possibilities at a fundamental level, employing the heuristic of local ecology and history. Encouraging students to see*

*their own surroundings as constructed from ideological and ecological histories will produce more cross-cultural consciousness and awareness of indigenous perspectives...* (Marker, 2006, p. 499).

It is clear that contemporary Indigenous schools cannot be successful without engaging with the colonial past and its ongoing impacts (Marker, 2011a; Smith, 1999). There is a great deal of work to be done on a local basis that is responsive to community-based strengths and challenges, especially in northern Canada where government policies and actions played out differently.

Mary Simon, president of Canada's Inuit representative organization Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, has said: "...if we are to restore the trust of parents who have been deeply hurt by their own educational experiences, we must build an education system grounded in the Inuit culture, history and worldview, and with respect for the role of parents" (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2011, p. 4). In undertaking school review and improvement processes or any significant community consultation processes in Nunavut schools, it is highly encouraged that community members be asked to participate in creating a local timeline of education, documentation of the history of schools in the area, and acknowledgement of the successes and challenges experienced from the perspective of parents, Elders and educators (Nunavut Department of Education, 2005). In some communities this may involve significant discussion of residential school experiences and reasons why parents continue to feel unwelcome or disengaged from the school environment, whereas in others it may involve positive memories of supportive teachers in early territorial day schools and appreciation of more recent community engagement by school

administrators. Whatever the history is, in order to increase parent engagement and support, which by extension is hoped to increase student achievement, such consciousness of the local past must be part of shaping the way forward on a school-by-school, family-by-family basis.

Decolonizing cannot be understood only in terms of changes in formal political power, nor is it an exclusively Indigenous concern (Regan, 2010). It involves a long-term process that has deep implications for settler societies, and may also provide opportunities to address significant social, economic and environmental issues in Canada more inclusively, creatively and effectively. Decolonizing necessitates activation of teaching and learning approaches that both acknowledge and deconstruct structures of power associated with colonization in an effort to create space for, and give legitimacy to, Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (Dion, 2009; Iseke-Barnes, 2008). The process of decolonizing schools is not achieved solely through the integration of Indigenous content, but through examining the power relationships that determine questions (and answers) regarding school structures, policy and decision-making, curriculum and pedagogy, teacher-student-community relationships, access to and assessment of student success.

**Radical Implementation and Radical Pedagogy to  
Better Serve the Interests of Students and Community**

*The greatest challenge is to be radical, to ask the right questions within the community, to ask the families what they want for their children (Kirkness, 1998, p. 11).*

Educational change requires radical disruption. This point not only applies to ideological challenges in the classroom, but to the beliefs and structures taken for granted in the ways schools operate, and by extension, the possibilities for radical reconstruction. Changes could be seen to the daily schedule and annual calendar, the assignment of students into grades, the course options available to students, the nature of relationships between administration and teachers / teachers and students, standardized assessments, use of funds for local programs, even the extent to which education should take place inside the school.

These arrangements have been called into question for different reasons since schools began, but now it is time to flex any available leverage for real change to enact place-based education and better meet the strengths and needs of the students and community in question. Nunavut schools, for example, have considered many of these reforms and indeed have opportunities to enact them – it is urgent that they do so both more quickly and with more commitment. As the cliché goes, change is harder than it sounds, hence the tyranny of our taken-for-granted systems. Most people and particularly most teachers, successful products of the institution of schooling themselves, prefer familiarity and routine than radical reconceptualization. And yet, the risks associated with implementing change are well worth accommodating if the alternative is continued disengagement from schooling by Indigenous youth – and the associated social issues, including suicide, seen to impact Indigenous families as a result. Tester & Irniq (2008) have highlighted the importance of creating a safe place for engagement with Inuit culture and its relationship to modern issues. They describe this practicing of IQ as:

...a spiritual and intellectual home, a safe place from which elders and youth alike can practice resistance through stories, art, music, research, writings, and very many forms of practice.... IQ can bring together generations of Inuit in a common challenge. That challenge is to hold in check relations that seriously threaten Inuit culture and, in so doing, put before us relationships between and among people, animals, landscapes relevant to all of us that might otherwise be absorbed by a very different, totalizing logic (p. 59).

Why shouldn't schools be this spiritual and intellectual home, this safe(r) place for Elders and youth? As an agenda of radical implementation is embarked on, and found to be successful, stories of change must be broadcast widely to the Indigenous education community.

### **Final Reflections from the Path**

The purpose of this work has been to examine the distinctiveness of Nunavut in the context of Indigenous history and education in Canada. This is not only because of the characteristics of place, which include isolated small communities and Arctic weather. Distinctions also come from the majority Inuit population that share more cultural and linguistic commonalities across great distances than other dispersed Indigenous peoples; the history of Inuit engagement in educational change prior to Nunavut; political accomplishment of the land claim; and, the legal, territorial mandate for Inuit education. Nunavut history has been marked by huge change, both in speed and degree, in terms of education as well as across other realms of society (Simon, 2011).

These are the distinct reference points I have tried to illustrate on this path, points that I

think are required to understand and better include Inuit in the literature on Indigenous education in Canada.

However, Nunavut schools and communities continue to grapple with overwhelming social issues, disengagement by Inuit youth, and an education system that lacks human resource stability, all of which undermine the potential benefits of educational self-determination. Nunavut educational change has a long way to go: to mentor youth through the challenges of walking in (at least) two worlds; to achieve human resource security through recruitment, retention, development and support; to participate in ongoing community, territorial and national processes for recognition of traumas and injustices associated with colonization and pursue decolonization; and, to support implementation of radical visions for Inuit education, rather than settling for incremental change to the way schools operate. Now that schooling in Nunavut is being built on Inuit foundations, and that educational self-determination is being sought in other jurisdictions as well, Indigenous student and family disengagement suggests that the structures of schooling are still not meeting their strengths and needs effectively. This moment in history, this place on the path, will become another point against which to measure further decolonization and educational change. Will it also become an intersection? Greater recognition and celebration of the Arctic journey completed thus far could be combined in future with greater dialogue and solidarity between Inuit and other Indigenous peoples. Inuit and Northerners can benefit from continuing to be included in the literature on Indigenous educational change, and other Indigenous peoples may benefit from greater exposure to the stories of Nunavut.

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